

wimp nation

There's an alarming spike in the number of college students with serious mental health problems. The best evidence suggests that parental invasiveness and overinvolvement is crippling children psychologically. A critical mass of "outcome-based" American parents are focusing their considerable professional skills time, and energies to protect their kids from outside hardships, all the while turning up the heat on them to achieve more.

Evidence: SAT coaches, cell phones that allow kids access to their parents' problemsolving skills 24/7, sanitizing gels stuffed into backpacks, "academic accommodations" for a dizzying array of designer disabilities, grade inflation etc.

The signs that kids are living under the whiplash effect of their parents' "be safe, but achieve" mantra are everywhere. Three of the top seven teenage fears are categorized as "performance-minded" anxieties "Getting a bad grade" (40%), "Doing poorly on the SATs or ACTs" (31%), and "Not getting into the college of your choice" (27%). Up until a decade ago, the most common problems brought to college counselors had to do with students' relationship issues. But that all changed in 1996, when students' anxiety issues overtook their relational concerns.

American parents today expect their children to be perfect-the smartest,fastest, most charming people in the universe. And if they can't get the children to prove it on their own, they'll turn to doctors to make their kids into the people that parents want to believe they are."

Affluence encouraged many parents to leave the workplace and devote their formidable professional expertise to a whole new enterprise-perfecting their kids and smoothing the path to success for them. That's likely why "I wish my parents had some hobby other than me." The result of all this parental handwringing over their kids' safety and future? Whether we want to or not, we're on our way to creating a nation of wimps."

But there is an antidote to the creeping wimpification of our kids.

Bad experiences are good experiences. Kids need to feel badly sometimes. We learn through experience and we learn through bad experiences. Through failure we learn how to cope.

Unstructured play is good play Kids have forgotten how to play spontaneously. They've been told by their coaches where on the field to stand, told by their parents what color socks to wear, told by referees who's won and what's fair. Kids are losing leadership skills. Unstructured play helps kids learn how to control themselves and interact with others. Play, he points out, is crucial to developing "cognitive agility."

Delayed gratification is good gratification The growing number of parents who give their kids an "artificial umbilical cord" -a cell phone. "Students are typically in contact with their parents several times a day reporting every flicker of experience." Add to that ATM machines that give instant cash, MP3 players that deliver instant music, and consumer goods available at a mouse click and we've made mush out of kids' ability to wait.